Principal sends back religious books; still believes God belongs in schools

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Body

Caving in to pressure from the ACLU, a public elementary school principal has boxed up Christian textbooks that describe other religions as cults and say God helped Columbus discover America.

Steven J. Wentland, who also serves as superintendent of the 60-student, one-school district, said Wednesday that "every last flashcard" would be delivered back to A Beka Books Inc., a Pensacola, Fla.-based Christian publishing company.

Wentland, whose business cards read "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord," said it was never his intention to endorse one religion over another, but rather to find the best books he could for his district.

"We'll pull them out. It's OK," he said, adding that he doesn't want to get into a courtroom battle or generate any more negative publicity. "We don't hold any grudges."

The legal dispute began last month in this virtually treeless community in the oil fields northwest of Bakersfield, where the few housing tracts are virtually invisible among the hundreds of pumps sucking the land dry.

Wentland, a towering man with close-cropped hair and wire-rimmed glasses who oversees five teachers at Belridge Elementary, approved the use of the A Beka curriculum after holding public meetings about the contents over the summer.

The school board also approved them, and all of the parents signed consent forms after they were shown samples and reassured that some of the material would be edited to avoid problems. An anonymous donor offered to pay for the books, so approval by state education officials was not mandatory.

The ACLU filed a lawsuit Aug. 24, a day after students were welcomed back from summer vacation with a banner in the cafeteria that read: "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of a retired Methodist minister and Veronica Van Ry, who felt compelled to pull her 13-year-old daughter out of the school.

The ACLU says the school board was crusading to insinuate its Christian views into the school and endorse a single religion, both clear violations of religious freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment.

Michael Small, chief counsel for the ACLU's Southern California office, said while the Constitution allows schools to integrate the Bible and religion in an objective manner, Belridge was crossing the line.

"It has embarked on a frightening crusade in which it seeks to indoctrinate behind the schoolhouse gates impressionable students - as young as 5-years-old - into accepting a prescribed religious orthodoxy," he said.

Small said he never heard of any other public school trying to use A Beka books in its classrooms.

A Beka describes itself as "unashamedly Christian and traditional in its approach." Its materials are commonly used by children schooled at home and at Christian schools, weaving fundamental Christian ideologies into daily exercises.

For example, a grammar book asks students to place the correct punctuation at the end of the following sentence: "The Hebrew people often grumbled and complained."

History books tell students that although American Indians "attained a degree of civilization," they "had no knowledge of the true God, and without this knowledge all other attainments are worthless." As for the colonists, the books instruct that "God allowed America to be hidden from Europe until Columbus discovered it."

Mathematics are described as "part of the truth and order that God has built into reality." Another book warns that non-Christians will be denied a place in heaven, and that Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists belong to cults.

Wentland maintained Wednesday that he believes that A Beka offers, by far, the most superior academic curriculum he has ever seen in his 15-plus years in education.

"That's why we chose them," he said. "The state of California would be hard-pressed to find books as good."

He also said he has no idea who offered to pay for them. On this point, some county education officials remain skeptical, and want an answer.

"These books didn't appear abandoned on the front steps like a basket of kittens," said Frank Fekete, general counsel for Schools Legal Service, the Kern County agency set up to offer legal advice to school districts.

"We don't want public officials accepting gifts from private individuals without some sort of public disclosure," Fekete added. "It just makes sense to know."

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